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## A comparison of the physical activity promotion strategies adopted by selected secondary schools in three European regions

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### Introduction

The concept of the 'active school' emerged a decade ago as the role with increasing recognition of the role of schools in the promotion of physical activity. In fact, school is potentially an ideal context for physical activity socialization because young people spend most of their time there. However, to play an effective role, schools must be aware of several requirements and recommendations from different health authorities (Pate et al., 2006). To provide some support to practitioners as well as to researchers, Cale (1997) proposed an 'active school' model designed to analyse the components which could influence the effectiveness of schools in promoting physical activity. The model emphasizes seven dimensions: school ethos and policies, PE curriculum, informal curriculum, environment, care and support, community links. The physical activity context is likely to differ according to educational and cultural differences within each region.

In Belgium, since 1989, the responsibility for education—and as a consequence, school physical education - was directed to the community level and there are three separate governing bodies for education according to the language spoken (Dutch, French and German). Each community steers an autonomous educational course (De Knop et al., 2005). In the French and German communities, the general objectives of the school system do not specifically mention the key role that Education should play in health education (see for example: Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997). The promotion of lifelong physical activity is traditionally accepted as an objective of PE even if it is not specifically mentioned in the PE objectives. In fact, each school can choose to adopt an overall policy focused on sport and physical activity or select other objectives (e.g. foreign languages, culture...). The major determining factors influencing the orientation of a school are the convictions of the senior staff (director and school council) and, sometimes, the status of the PE and the PE teachers. The same situation exists in the German speaking region of Belgium.

In the United Kingdom, there is also an educational autonomy across different parts of the country. The context however, is totally different from that of Belgium in that, within the National Curriculum in England, health education is a non statutory component of Personal, Social and Health Education and health related exercise (HRE) is a statutory component of the National Curriculum for PE.

### Objective of the study

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study which, drawing on Cale's 'Active School' model, aimed to compare the nature and extent of physical activity promotion in secondary schools in three European regions. In so doing, it aimed to establish whether there were cultural differences in the strategies and approaches adopted by schools.

### Method

Eight schools were selected which were known to place importance on physical activity and which were considered as good examples in their own community. Four schools were located in the French speaking part of Belgium, one in the middle of England and three in the German speaking part of Belgium. The research should thus be considered as a case study that will not allow us to generalize but to allow ideas to emerge. In each region, data were collected in the subjects' mother language. A cross-cultural translation of the instruments was used to ensure that data collection was as valid as possible (Banville, Desrosiers & Genet-Volet, 2000). According to the triangulation process, data was collected via several sources including: interviews with the school director and at least one PE teacher; questionnaire to final grade students; and informal observation of the physical and social environments. Despite the methodological precautions taken, the data gathered were not exactly the same in three regions due to organisational differences within the schools. Case studies however, allow such discrepancy between sites (Huberman & Miles, 1991).

The collected information was analysed with reference to a reading grid developed based on the dimensions of Cale's 'Active School' model. Data derived from the separate sources were combined, synthesized and key words were identified. Two researchers checked the data to validate the coding process.

### Results and discussion

It is particularly difficult to summarize the large amount of data collected in few words. As expected, the English school to adhere more closely to the characteristics of an 'active school' than its Belgian counterparts. This may be due to this school having to fulfil National Curriculum requirements or to the recent large government investment in PE and school sport in England through the PE, School Sport and Clubs Links Strategy. Emphasis on health promotion and the promotion of a physically active lifestyle was not so strong in both Belgian communities. The main illustration of this was

the lack of a written physical activity policy in 6 out of 7 Belgian schools, regardless of the linguistic community. In these schools, it was interesting to notice that all staff shared a positive opinion about the promotion of an active lifestyle but when a precise description of concrete actions or strategies was requested, discourses became more vague. School investment in PE, as well as the status of PE generally also presented major differences between England and the two other regions, with less interest in physical activity and sport shown in the latter. This could possibly be explained by the lack of PE/sport policy in these regions, resulting in low budgets, lack of resources and training, low motivation etc.

**Table 1. Analysis of the schools' characteristics according to the 'Active School' model' (Cale, 1997)**

| School | Policy         | Ethos              | Environment          | Support                   | Hidden curriculum          | Curriculum | Community         |
|--------|----------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| 1      | None           | PE regarded        | Poor facilities      | Direction's consent       | Out of school competitions | Fun        | 1 link            |
| 2      | None           | PE low regarded    | Good facilities      | Direction's consent       | Extracurricular activities | Fun        | No link           |
| 3      | None           | PE low regarded    | Good facilities      | Direction's consent       | Out of school competitions | Fun        | No link           |
| 4      | Written policy | PE Regarded        | Good facilities      | Direction's consent       | Out of school competitions | Fun        | 1 link            |
| 5      | Written policy | PE highly regarded | Excellent facilities | School's investment       | Both                       | Health     | More than 3 links |
| 6      | None           | PE regarded        | Good facilities      | Direction's consent       | Out of school competitions | Health     | 2 links           |
| 7      | None           | PE low regarded    | Good facilities      | PE teachers' independence | Out of school competitions | Fun        | 2 links           |
| 8      | None           | PE regarded        | Good facilities      | PE teachers' independence | Out of school competitions | Health     | 2 links           |

Belgian French and German speaking schools differed essentially in terms of support, curriculum and community links. In German speaking schools, PE teachers were more independent, the priority of PE was weighted more towards health and there were more links with the community. Moreover, it appeared that private (catholic) schools were more committed to physical activity promotion than state schools. That finding could be linked to the specific interpretation of the regional curriculum that this school network proposed (Carlier, 2007).

## Conclusion

Whilst generalizations are not possible, our findings nevertheless suggest that the 'Active School' model is not yet being well implemented in both of the Belgian regions in which we collected our data. This is directly linked to the content of the regional programmes. Some positive changes may be seen in the future however, as the European Commission are supporting health education projects. Most staff members highlighted the importance of the promotion of physical activity in their discourses but did not seem to be able to put this rhetoric into practice. Overall therefore, it seems that there is a need for more guidance for schools in both Belgian regions. Continuing professional development for teachers could help schools to establish the most effective strategies for promoting physical activity as well as to disseminate existing good practice.

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